

Traction gains Momentum
Week #4: An unnatural response

We have this new church that is trying to become a movement. Jesus has given them the plan. It is the Great Commission.

¹⁸ Jesus came and told his disciples, "I have been given all authority in heaven and on earth. ¹⁹ Therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations,^[b] baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. ²⁰ Teach these new disciples to obey all the commands I have given you. And be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age." Matthew 28:18-20

They have received the Holy Spirit and the accompanying power to heal the sick, blind, and lame as well as teaching that makes people want to follow Jesus. **The number is in the thousands**, but only in Jerusalem. They haven't gone to the entire world yet.

And now, they are experiencing some rough sledding. Their leaders have been arrested multiple times. The Jewish religious leaders **have them in their sights** and aren't too keen on being told that they killed Jesus and that he is alive. Oh, and there was one **mysterious jailbreak** that still can't be explained. **The whole city is filled with their teaching** about Jesus being Christ, the King, Messiah, and he is alive. **And the icing on the cake is that in their last interview with the religious leaders they were beaten** and then threatened about preaching in Jesus' name before being released.

And yet, they keep adding people. But is adding people going to accomplish the Great Commission?

They are experiencing resistance and it's about to get worse. Yes, worse than false arrest, beatings, and intimidation. At first, everyone loved them and they had a good name in the community, but that is starting to change.

Wouldn't it be better if everyone loved them? Isn't resistance and persecution bad? But remember, their task is not to remain happily in Jerusalem, **singing Kumbaya and waiting** for Jesus to return. And yes, he did say he would return. **They need something to propel them outward, to give them momentum.** Their task is not to grow or add people. **Their job is to multiply, that's the only way this thing goes worldwide.** This cannot be a regional thing or even a Jewish thing.

That brings us to today's section of the book of Acts. I'm going to be reading **sections of Chapter 6**, where we see another problem. Some of the **widows** aren't getting taken care of in the church. They need some leaders to take on this task.

Therefore, brothers,^[b] pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. ⁴ But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word." ⁵ And what they said pleased the whole gathering, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit... Acts 6:2-5 And then there is a list of others that will be **working with Stephen.**

And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith. Acts 6:7

Again, **in the midst of all that is going on that is negative**, they are making more disciples in Jerusalem. Even priests are joining their ranks.

And Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people. ⁹ Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), and of the Cyrenians, and of the Alexandrians, and of those from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and disputed with Stephen. ¹⁰ But they could not withstand the **wisdom and the Spirit** with which he was speaking. ¹¹ Then they secretly instigated men who said, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God." ¹² And they stirred up the people and the elders and the scribes, and they came upon him and seized him and brought him before the council, ¹³ and they set up false witnesses who said, "This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law, ¹⁴ for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us." ¹⁵ And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was **like the face of an angel**. And the high priest said, "Are these things so?" **2** And Stephen said: Acts 6:8-7:1

Stephen then preaches a long sermon/history lesson for these leaders. This isn't really a **defense** because, as you can see, he's not really trying to prove his innocence.

Hit key ideas in speech:

- **God is working beyond Israel.**
- **Acceptable worship** isn't only given at the Jerusalem temple.
- Jews have **constantly rejected** God's messengers.

This is the perfect sermon to illustrate what needs to happen if they are to gain the momentum to launch outward across the world. **The message of Jesus Christ is not regional, or tied to any culture or ethnic group.**

This is actually the **longest sermon recorded in the book of Acts**. I'll let you read it on your own. **Let's slide down to the end** of his sermon/history lesson. **The room has been getting tense** throughout this sermon. This is when it **gets confrontational**.

"You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. ⁵² Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered, ⁵³ you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it."

⁵⁴ Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him. ⁵⁵ But he, **full of the Holy Spirit**, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. ⁵⁶ And he said, "Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." ⁵⁷ But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together^[b] at him. ⁵⁸ Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul. ⁵⁹ And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." ⁶⁰ And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, "**Lord, do not hold this sin against them.**" And when he had said this, he fell asleep. Acts 7:51-60

This event is the trigger that causes the momentum that is building in this Jerusalem group to explode outward. Remember to obey the great commission that has to happen. **This is the tipping point** that puts them over the edge. **The resistance and suffering and now death will be what God uses to push them outward.**

That's why there is so much attention given to Stephen. Not just that he was the first martyr, but it was his response to what was happening to him. In detailing this story, Luke takes great pains to not simply give what happened, but a glimpse into **Stephen's character that led to this "unnatural response" to suffering, injustice, and ultimately death.**

The right response to resistance and suffering produces momentum.

God used Stephen's response to the attempts of the enemy to squash this movement before it can go worldwide, to do the very thing they were trying to prevent.

This is the transition between the **Judean phase of Acts** and the **non-Judean phase**, and a link between **Peter** (the apostle to the Jews) and **Paul** (the apostle to the Gentiles). This is the beginning of the "to all the world" part of the Great Commission. **This event propels them. Repeat...resistance is necessary for momentum to be gained.**

In the midst of resistance and suffering... He is still willing to trust Jesus.

If there were ever a time to bail and save your hide, this was the time. **You could back peddle**, lie, spin, debate words, attack the false witnesses...

Let's go back to the beginning of this story, because there are clues to what kind of person Stephen was before we saw him under pressure.

And what they said pleased the whole gathering, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit... Acts 6:5

Here's the criterion for all the men they were choosing.

There is **something different about Stephen**. "His faith was not different in kind from the faith that all Christians have, but exceptional in the extent to which he was willing to trust Christ, to take him at his word and to risk all for Christ's sake." David Williams 244

When it ceases to be easy, that's when we are tempted to say, "Well that just doesn't work in this world. I need to operate in a way that makes sense in the here and now."

Stephen demonstrated his trust by healing people and displaying the power of The Holy Spirit in the midst of resistance. They are on the radar of people who can make their life difficult.

He was willing to give the message that was absolutely necessary at the moment in time. **He couldn't back off on the "you killed him" talk**, but God needed the message of gospel and salvation and a relationship with their God was **no longer about them and their temple**. It was all about Jesus. **The temple had served its purpose**, but this is a new day.

This sermon was pivotal. Everything was moving toward this moment and this message. All those men **needed to hear it clearly laid out, using the scripture** that they all agreed upon. This is the moment. **It's been building to this point and if Stephen back peddles, then all this momentum could be lost.** They could fall back and **feel really good about being this regional Jerusalem group of Jews** who believe that Jesus was the Jewish Messiah. It really could go that direction. **But God chose a man who had unnatural trust and he gave him the message.**

God is asking me to trust him that if we do this thing the Jesus way and not the American way, then he will be glorified and the great commission will happen in our midst. **And I'm asking you to trust that message even when** someone might leave or we see a huge crowd on Sunday morning. **Please, I'm not trying to compare myself to Stephen.** Believe me, I'm not Stephen. I get weak in the knees sometimes.

Do you trust him enough for him to create momentum in your life? Do you believe that he wants to use you for the Great commission? Has he placed you in the right spot, just like Stephen?

That's an unnatural response and God used it. Here's another thing about Stephen that led God to use him. **In the midst of suffering and resistance...(14) He continues display evidence of The Holy Spirit.**

I can display evidence of the Holy Spirit when things are going well. When they aren't, I can easily display these characteristics...**fear, compromise, self-doubt, lack of faith, looking for security,** and the safe play etc.

And Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people. Acts 6:8

In the midst of all this resistance and stress, Stephen displays the most power?
Seems opposite doesn't it?

These next two are also evidence of the Holy Spirit. They aren't as visible for all to see as the power of healing people, doing signs and wonders, and standing up and telling people who can kill you what they don't want to hear, but desperately need to hear.

That's where that very important phrase " full of grace and power" comes in. That's an interesting combination that most people have a tough time balancing.

In the midst of resistance and suffering... **He is able to be gracious.**

The power is external and the grace is internal. He was a man so affected by God's grace that he was gracious to others, even when they want to kill him and have the ability to do it. **He sees what they want to do to him, but he also sees beyond that to what their rejection of Jesus will mean for them and all who will continue to come to them for their connection to God.**

Being gracious is next level stuff. **It's for people who create momentum for others.** The power of healing, and even preaching, are easier to pull off than this graciousness. Because **grace is about the one opposing me,** not the one who loves the sermon or is amazed by some sign or wonder. We tend to put the flashy visible stuff up as top level, but it's not. **This is the proof of being filled with the Holy Spirit.**

Yes, he preached this powerful sermon with boldness. **Yes, he healed people** and did miraculous things. **But he also took care of the widows.** And his face looked like that of an angel, not someone who was red in the face, shaking his fist at them. **And ultimately, and amazingly unnaturally, he asked God not to hold them guilty of what they were doing to him.**

Luke has given a "description of one whose communion with God was such that something of the divine glory was reflected in him." 246

There's a great song I love called, "Never had to Knock on Wood". The lyrics go something like this:

I'm not a coward, I've just never been tested
I'd like to think that if I was, I would pass
Look at the tested and think there but for the grace go I

Might be a coward
I'm afraid of what I might find out

When we allow Jesus to give us this combination of grace and power, like Stephen, then we will begin to live out the great commission in powerful ways to the 3rd and 4th generation.

In the midst of resistance and suffering... **He speaks with divine wisdom.**

I know that right now, all across this room, many of **you are thinking that divine wisdom is for giving sermons** on Sunday morning and not for people like you. **It's for the Peters and Johns of the world not the guy who takes care of the widows.** Yes, God brought great wisdom from a guy who they picked to take care of the widows.

When those guys from different synagogues came to argue with him about Jesus, it says this: **But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking. V. 10 This isn't Paul, a man trained in the scriptures.**

Stephen trusted in Jesus so much that he was the poster boy for these words... **for I will give you the right words and such wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to reply or refute you!** **Luke 21:15 NLT Jesus was speaking about the future when his followers would be dragged in front of judges** and put in jail. He said don't worry about what you are going to say. **I guess Jesus knew what was going to happen** and that he would keep his promises. Stephen is proof of that. And he didn't worry.

There have been times when I've crashed and burned when confronted for Christ and I haven't had the words. **Maybe that's because I wasn't ready.** Maybe that's because I needed to learn a lesson and God was going to work for my good in my failure. **Or maybe that just wasn't the time when the message and the setting came together as God's plan.** I say that because **we tend to not think of ourselves as people for whom this promise is true.** **That's a problem for the Great Commission.** **We remember that failure** and so it's easier to read these verses for someone who is holier or wiser than me. **But wisdom doesn't come from within, it is given, revealed.**

Let's get back to where we started. God is going to use **Stephens response to resistance and suffering** to create the momentum this movement needs in order to live out the great commission by moving out of Jerusalem into the entire world.

In the midst of resistance and suffering, even to death, Stephen responds with...

- With a willingness to trust Jesus.
- Continued to display evidence of the Holy Spirit.
- He was able to remain gracious.
- He was somehow able to speak with wisdom.

What does this mean? It adds up as obedience under extreme duress. It was all **founded on that trust** in Jesus that if he called him to do it, then it was right, whether he lived or died.

Each time he said, "My grace is all you need. My power works best in weakness." So now I am glad to boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ can work through me. 2 Corinthians 12:9

I believe that when we live out of this verse, we can be the reason our lives and our church can gain momentum. When we believe that there is where his power is perfected.

It's the unshakable belief that he is enough. When we live in that reality, like Stephen, we discover new reserves of spiritual power, which enables us to love others from resources far deeper than our own willpower. (Learning to live and love like Jesus)

Stephen also knew that it was not in comfort that the power to give this movement momentum. It was suffering. This is the truth in advertising. Are we willing to endure suffering for others to know the healing transforming power of Jesus?

Now I want you to know, brothers and sisters,^[a] that what has happened to me has actually served to advance the gospel. Philippians 1:12 NIV

We are not modeling after Stephen, we are modeling after the Jesus we see in Stephen.

Which one of these do you need more of? Start by asking. **Now do one thing to push yourself to practice that Jesus-like attribute.**

Not giving forgiveness could have been the thing that stalled this movement.

Ultimately, the proof of all these responses and what unleashed this movement was forgiveness. Is there someone you need to forgive or is there someone you have forgiven that you need to make sure you put this rock down, giving up the right to throw it at a later date if behavior doesn't change to your liking?

- Write initials or a symbol or something that only you know what it means.
- On the other side write that one attribute you need more of.